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SUBJECT: U.S. ARMY THINK TANK REPORT MAKES THE FRONT PAGE

¶1. (SBU) Summary. A Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) Report titled "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counter Drug Policy" made the front page of El Universal's July 5 Sunday edition. Although, the SSI report was published in May 2009, El Universal led with a headline suggesting that the U.S. was looking at adopting a narco-counterinsurgency strategy as the next step in the war on drugs in Mexico. El Universal highlighted only certain elements of the report and failed to note that SSI is an independent, Army War College think tank and that the report clearly states it does not/not reflect USG policy. The article coincided with a visit by NORTHCOM Commander General Renuart and was the lead topic of discussion during his meeting with the Mexican Secretary of Defense. While the press, on occasion, appears predisposed to generate controversy with its reporting on these kinds of papers, SEDENA increasingly appreciates the academic independence enjoyed by report drafters and when in doubt engages us directly for clarification. End Summary

Getting It Wrong

¶2. (U) SSI's report entitled "Mexico's Narco-Insurgency and U.S. Counter Drug Policy" was written by Hal Brands, a doctoral candidate from Yale University. The first page of the report clearly states that the author's views and opinions do not necessarily reflect official USG policy and that such academic freedom empowers authors to explore controversial perspectives in the interest of furthering debate on key issues. The report addresses three major themes. First, Brand describes Mexico's drug cartels as comparable to insurgent paramilitary organizations in terms of both their military sophistication and brutality. As such, like insurgent groups, these "third generation gangs" seek to create "no-go zones" for the government and police so they can operate with autonomy. The second part of the report speaks to "gaps" in the Merida Initiative. According to Brands, the Merida Initiative focuses disproportionately on supply interdiction and will not produce long term success. In the final part of his report, Brand calls for a more balanced, holistic approach that devotes greater attention to reducing U.S. drug demand and promoting Mexican economic development and institution building as the only viable means for tackling Mexico's crime problem at its most fundamental level.

¶3. (U) The El Universal article selectively hones in on the first theme of the Brand's report. It describes SSI as a "dependent" of the Defense Department and suggests its report alerts the USG to the growth of third generation gangs akin to paramilitary groups, which should consequently prompt the U.S. to embrace a counterinsurgency strategy. Although almost an entire full page in length, the article only briefly mentions the other themes touched on in the report.

Its final paragraph, which is only one sentence, speaks to the report's criticism of the Merida Initiative. El Universal fails to mention that SSI is a think tank that the DOD uses to explore ideas and generate debate and does not/not reflect USG policy.

Setting the Record Straight

14. (SBU) Publication of this article coincided with a visit by NORTHCOM General Renuart. In his meeting with Renuart and the Charge d'Affaires, the Mexican Secretary of Defense, General Galvan brought up the article as the first topic of discussion. Galvan seized upon two points in the article -- the suggestion in the report that the cartels are transforming into paramilitary organizations and its advocacy of a counterinsurgency strategy. Describing the challenges Mexico faces combating organized crime, Galvan remarked that he did not believe the SSI report's usage of the terms paramilitary forces and counterinsurgency accurately reflected the current situation in Mexico. Renuart assured Galvan that the U.S. does not regard the cartels as comparable to insurgent forces, and that DOD cooperation with Mexico is not seen through the lens of counterinsurgency. The Charge d'Affaires further noted the independent nature of this report stressing that it does not represent the views of the USG. He also said that these types of academic reports produced by USG sponsored schools are very common with regard to U.S. policy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas/issues around the world. Galvan appreciated the clarification and appeared satisfied that the report did not reflect a change in U.S. policy.

15. (SBU) The DAO sponsored a July 6 reception for General Renuart to which it invited 44 high ranking officials from SEDENA and SEMAR. The Army Attach individually approached General Roberto Miranda Sanchez, Inspector/Comptroller General of the Mexican Army and General Medina Herrera, Deputy Director for Military Doctrine. Although neither had read the article, they were aware of the headline and the substance of the article and each responded to the Army AttachQ, similarly. Both understood and seemed to appreciate the independent nature of the academic community in the U.S. and commented that the Mexican press tends to sensationalize reports like these to sell newspapers. Subsequently, the Army AttachQ received a request for the report from COL Hernan Cortez of the counterintelligence branch of the Mexican Army. The Army AttachQ will provide the links to the SSI web site which summarizes the article, email the report in PDF format, and translate the author's academic credentials for distribution.

16. (SBU) Comment. We had two initial concerns about the appearance of this article. First, the SSI report focuses disproportionate attention on U.S. efforts to strengthen Mexico's law enforcement capabilities, neglecting that MI funds similarly are dedicated to promoting human rights respect, building stronger institutions, strengthening civil society, and combating drug demand in Mexico. Second, this article failed to inform the reader that the report does not reflect USG policy. Fortunately, the article does not appear to have generated much concern among the public or the Mexican military.

17. (SBU) According to the Embassy's Public Affairs Section, the Universal reporter Doris Gomora is a special reports journalist and likes to report on perceived inside information that she receives from contacts in Washington. Two additional articles have been published detailing aspects of this SSI report. The first on 16 June in the Dario de Juarez and the second on June 23 in El Financiero. Each article similarly generated no interest or inquiries from the Mexican Government or the public. The Mexican Defense Secretariat appears to appreciate increasingly the academic independence of institutions like SSI and understands that these reports do not reflect a shift in U.S. policy in Mexico. Inasmuch as General Renuart and General Galvan were able to talk about the implications of the article, no further reaction is expected from SEDENA. End Comment

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